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ABSTRACT

To examine literacy instruction in light of recent research and practice, this journal issue presents five articles focusing on the creation of a literate society where people appreciate literature and can use reading and writing to enrich their lives. The first article, "Literacy Instruction: An Alternative" (A. S. Bayer), presents an alternative to the traditional approach of teaching reading and writing as isolated skills and advocates instead starting with "real" or meaningful situations like reading or writing stories. The second article, "Of Scarecrows and Avalanches: Looking at Children's Writing" (S. Wilde) analyzes discussions with children about their writing, while the third article, "Conferencing: Writing as a Collaborative Activity" (J. M. Newman), advocates the use of writing conferences as a means of helping children (and adults) examine and revise their own writing. The fourth article, "Literary Analysis: Help Children Take the Plunge with Picture Storybooks" (C. S. Chang), proposes that elementary school children are capable literary critics. The final article, "What Place Pleasure in the Reading Systems?" (S. L. Root, Jr.) expresses concern over the extent to which basal readers use good literature to teach isolated skills, thereby destroying any pleasure derived from reading good literature. (SKC)

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CONTENTS

2 Concerning This Issue

3 Literacy Instruction: An Alternative
Ann Shea Bayer

7 Of Scarecrows and Avalanches: Looking at Children's Writing
Sandra Wilde

11 Conferencing: Writing as a Collaborative Effort
Judith M. Newman

16 Literary Analysis: Help Children Take The Plunge with Picture Storybooks
Catherine Studier Ching

20 What Place Pleasure in the Reading Systems?
Shelton L. Root, Jr.

Volume 24, Number 1

25 210 321

CONCERNING THIS ISSUE

Everyone has an opinion about how reading and writing ought to be taught. This issue of *Educational Perspectives* examines literacy instruction in light of recent research and the practical experiences of its authors.

If a single word could sum up the philosophy of the authors represented in this issue, it would be "trust." Sandra Wilde emphasizes the importance of trust: ". . . trust in the children's innate drive and ability to become better users of written language, and to direct most of that process for themselves; and trust in our own abilities as professionals to use our trained instincts to tune into and support that growth."

The traditional approach to teaching reading and writing begins by teaching isolated skills, i.e., the alphabet, letter sounds, etc. Once these skills have been mastered, the child begins to apply them to a "real" situation, either reading a story or writing one. Bayer, in the lead article, presents an alternative to this traditional approach; she advocates starting with the "real" or meaningful situation, such as reading or writing a story, and teaching the skills gradually as the child encounters a need to learn them in order to clarify the message.

Wilde and Newman focus on the writing component of literacy instruction. Both authors emphasize the importance of placing the child at the center of her learning. In her research, Wilde talked at length with children about their writing. She presents her findings here, supporting her analyses with actual samples of children's writing.

Newman advocates the use of writing conferences as a means of helping children (and adults) examine and revise their own writing. Traditionally, the teacher "corrects" a piece of writing; the teacher who conferences with children, on the other hand, raises questions, allows the children to make their own revisions, and ultimately helps them to begin to trust their own judgements.

Chang and Root focus on the reading component of literacy instruction. Chang suggests that elementary school children are capable literary critics. Teachers who believe this, who ask probing questions, and who are willing to allow children to explore books will be fostering the development of critical, lifetime readers. The article presents a practical method for introducing literary criticism to elementary children.

Finally, Root expresses his concern over the extent to which basal reading systems, which are widely used in schools, use good literature as a vehicle to teach isolated skills. This overemphasis on skills not only destroys the meaning of the text for the child, but also the pleasure derived from reading good literature.

We, as educators, have the greatest opportunity to produce literate people by trusting in the intelligence and abilities of our students, allowing them to make decisions, to modify them, and to use language in a very "real" sense — for making meaning.

Catherine S. Chang
Assistant Professor of Education

LITERACY INSTRUCTION
An Alternative

Ann Shea Bayer

"Basic skills" have been abandoned in our elementary schools. On the contrary, the skills stressed in present day language arts and reading programs are handwriting, punctuation, spelling, knowledge about standard English grammar, "correct" oral reading, and phonics instruction.[1] The emphasis in these "basic skills" curricula is almost exclusively on knowledge about language forms.

This instruction reflects "bottom-up" or reductionist[2] models of language learning. For example, reading, at the highest level, means understanding the author's intentions. This presumes that the reader has extracted the information provided by the text, which in turn depends upon comprehending the individual sentences, which depends upon recognizing the individual words of those units, which depends upon recognizing their individual letters.[3]

In a similar fashion, writing is also thought of as a set of discrete skills with mastery of these skills the goal of writing instruction.[4] Language arts curriculum guides outline writing instructions as sequences of punctuation skills, grammatical structures, spelling, and penmanship, each to be mastered separately.

When reading or writing is analyzed in this way, the components appear to be organized hierarchically. The attainment of any given level assumes the mastery of all subordinate levels. For teachers, this provides a rational structure for K-6 continua: start at the bottom, with single letter recognition, and sequentially work up through higher levels.[5]

The hierarchical structure embedded in this notion of separate and sequential skills is reflected also in many other aspects of the classroom. Specifically, classes are usually structured into a "bottom" to "top" hierarchy through homogeneous grouping; the teacher's role is typically that of conveyor and examiner of a finite set of discrete skills; the student is usually in the subordinate position of a receiver of a set body of information; literacy instruction is separated from the use of language in the content areas; and assessment is primarily quantitative, reflecting an emphasis on mastery of each skill determined by the "one correct" response; such is the dominant language arts and reading curriculum in our elementary schools today.

The current literacy crisis is not the result of an abandonment of basic skills but is the result of an overemphasis on language forms

The current literacy crisis is not the result, then, of an abandonment of basic skills, but (at least in part) is the result of an overemphasis on language forms. It is necessary therefore to look for an alternative model of language development as an alternative solution to current literacy concerns.

A now familiar alternative embodies the notion that language development occurs through meaningful language use and that the most appropriate use in a school environment is using language as a tool for learning across the curriculum. Language and learning become inseparable.

The relationship that I will describe between language and learning is based on a theory of how people learn; how people make connections between new ideas and what they already know; and how they reconstruct knowledge so that it makes sense.

A number of philosophers, psychologists, linguists and educators have argued that people learn much like the scientist conducting research. The scientist's method of in-

quiry is to formulate hypotheses about the way things are, to put these hypotheses to the test, and to reframe them in the light of what happens. More generally, these hypotheses take the form of an individual's 'world view' or 'representation of experience.'[6] An individual's hypotheses are expectations formulated out of past experiences.

This concept of individuals constantly using past experiences to make predictions/hypotheses "is a view of human behavior that makes living very much like learning, and that equates learning with learning from experience."[7]

The relationship of this theory of learning to language is threefold: (a) language itself is first acquired through learning from experience using hypotheses-testing strategies within an interactive environment; (b) language, in turn, is then used as a tool for further learning as it is a major means by which we organize our representations of experience; (c) language development beyond childhood continues through similar learning processes. I will discuss each of these issues in turn.

The first forms of language develop in an interactive social context in which the participants share a world view

The first forms of language develop in an interactive social context in which the participants (the family) share a world view. Starting with the familiar, links are made, through a "here and now" context, to the new. Adults, for example, may pick out objects or actions in the immediate environment that they think interest the child, and begin a conversation. Interaction with others is vital to language acquisition. Children use context clues from the immediate environment to begin to map ideas onto language. They begin to form hypotheses about word meaning and use it to see if it brings the anticipated reaction. If it does, the child assimilates it into her representation of experience, and, if it doesn't, she modifies or rejects it.[8]

It is important to note the role that adults play in responding to children's attempts to learning language. Adults seldom correct what a child says as long as what the child says is true. Grammatical errors typically go uncorrected. What adults seem to be primarily concerned with is a child's ability to communicate.[9] This is an emphasis on ability to *use* language meaningfully as the route to language growth. According to Halliday,[10] learning to talk is learning "how to mean" with oral language.

Having acquired the ability to talk, language can be used as a tool for further learning. It is used to organize thought. Words begin to be used as labels for categories of experiences thereby providing a means by which individuals can organize their experiences. Having an organized 'filing system' as a guide, individuals are aided in making predictions, formulating hypotheses, and interpreting new experiences.[11]

Having stated that learning, learning language, and using language for learning all involve learning from experience using hypothesis-testing strategies within an interactive social context, it is reasonable to infer that further language growth, e.g., acquiring literacy, depends on these same notions applied to an ever widening variety of language and learning experiences. A number of recent studies support the suggested parallel between the processes involved in oral language acquisition and those involved in literacy (reading and writing) acquisition.[12] What Goodman[13] suggests is that literacy learning is learning "how to mean" with written language.

Evidence of parallel hypotheses-testing strategies involved in both oral and written language development is present in the view that reading, for example, is "only incidentally visual."[14] Readers select a minimum amount of visual information (print) and intepret it with nonvisual information stored in our memory.[15] The nonvisual information is based on past experiences which allow the reader to generate hypotheses in an attempt to construct meaning from the print.

Similarly, studies of young children's attempts at spelling provide evidence for the hypotheses-testing process in writing.[16] A child, for example, might make the following modifications over time for the spelling of the word "GRASS":

G
GS
GRS
GRES
GRASS[17]

Read[18] regards these invented spellings

> as based on a set of tacit hypotheses about phonetic relationships and sound spelling correspondences, which the child was able to modify readily as he or she encountered new information about standard spelling.[19]

What changes in literacy instruction would occur if we adopted this hypotheses-testing theoretical framework as the basis for promoting language development in our schools? The curriculum would have to provide for interactive social contexts in which learners could use their past experiences to generate hypotheses in an attempt to construct meaning to solve school-related tasks. Language and learning become inseparable.

The following outline suggests several possibilities for change:

Literacy Instruction

What now exists:

(1) Reductionist Models of Literacy
(2) Emphasis on "Studying about language forms"
(3) Separates literacy instruction
  a) from rest of curriculum
  b) into different parts, i.e., reading from writing

Associated with:

(4) Teacher in role of examiner
(5) Separation between teacher as learner and student as learner
(6) Student dependence
(7) Little peer learning, i.e., partners, small groups
(8) Homogeneous grouping
(9) Quantitative assessment, i.e., standardized skills test

Result:

Knowledge about language forms

Proposed Alternative:

(1) Interactive-Constructionist Models of Literacy
(2) Emphasis on "Using language as a tool for learning"
(3) Integrates literacy instruction
  a) into rest of curriculum
  b) reading-writing-speaking-listening

Associated with:

(4) Teacher in role of collaborator
(5) Connection between teacher as learner and student as learner
(6) Student independence
(7) Peer learning, i.e., partners, small groups
(8) Heterogeneous grouping
(9) Qualitative assessments, i.e., writing samples

Result:

Ability to use language appropriately according to situation

What this outline of Literacy Instruction suggests is that interactive-constructionist models of literacy, which reflect the hypotheses-testing process, would replace the bottom-up models currently underlying the sequential "basic skills" curriculum in our schools.

The emphasis in literacy instruction would then shift from "studying about language forms" to using language as a tool for learning across the curricula. In this functional approach, language is used to construct meaning to solve the "thinking" tasks demanded in the various subject areas. Language development (talking, listening, reading, writing) occurs through meaningful language use.

In this constructivist view, the teacher expects students to be active participants, not passive recipients, in the process of learning.[20]

Therefore, the teacher is likely to adopt the role of collaborator. Teaching and learning would be viewed as a partnership in which the student's job is not just to take over someone else's preformulated information but to construct knowledge. Students would be encouraged to use their past experiences to generate hypotheses, to put these hypotheses to the test, and to reframe them in light of what happens — the same processes the teacher needs when she is in the role of learner.

It is time for educators to modify classroom practices that no longer remain valid in light of current knowledge of language and development

When learners have insufficient prior knowledge to begin a new task, the teacher provides scaffolding (preteaching) techniques to help the learners begin to make connections between new ideas and past experiences; gradually the teacher withdraws as the learners become more independent.[21]

When this notion of collaboration is expanded to include the learner's peers, thereby providing interactive environments, mixed-expertise groups become more common, making the homogeneous grouping typically associated with the hierarchical structure of the "bottom-up" models unnecessary.

And finally, language competence would be assessed according to students' abilities to *use* language appropriately in a variety of situations across subject areas. It is time for educators to modify classroom practices that no longer remain valid in light of our current knowledge of language development; we have alternatives.

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OF SCARECROWS AND AVALANCHES
Looking at Children's Writing

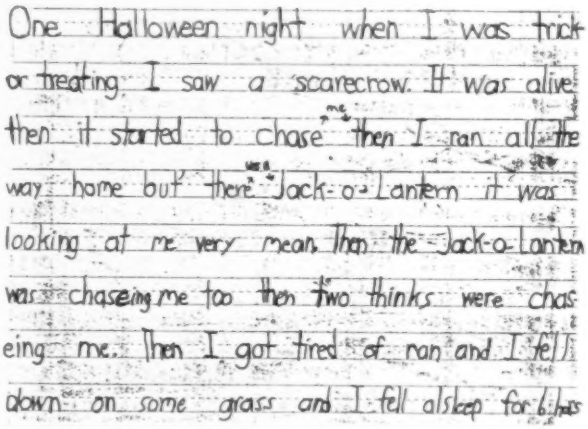
Sandra Wilde

A researcher looking at children's writing sometimes feels like an archeologist; a simple artifact, unprepossessing on the surface, can, if one knows what to look for, tell a great deal about the life of the person who produced it. To put it another way, a child's written story is just the tip of the iceberg.

This writer was recently a part of a research project, directed by Yetta Goodman at the University of Arizona and funded by the National Institute of Education,[1] which observed ten children from the O'odham (Papago) tribe writing in the classroom during their third- and fourth-grade years. Two pieces of writing by a single child (out of 288 texts collected), along with data about what went on during the writing process, will suggest what a small amount of data can show us about the writing process, children, and language use. It should be noted that just as an archeologist doesn't base theory on a single piece of pottery, the conclusions and implications suggested here are grounded in the study as a whole. But looking at just a few pieces of writing is not only a useful way to illustrate those more general conclusions but also a reminder of the wealth of information contained in a single artifact. In this case, information is available about semantic/pragmatic, linguistic, and developmental processes, with a major generalization emerging about each one. Each of these generalizations also suggests implications for teachers.

The first of these generalizations is that the creation of meaning, the semantic and pragmatic choices that are made about a piece of writing, is a complex and not always visible process.

The process is, first of all, a complex one because a writer must make multiple decisions about every piece of writing, as Gordon's scarecrow story, following, illustrates:


One Halloween night when I was trick or treating I saw a scarecrow. It was alive then it started to chase me then I ran all the way home but there was Jack-o-Lantern it was looking at me very mean. Then the Jack-o-Lantern was chaseing me too then two thinks were chaseing me. Then I got tired of ran and I fell down on some grass and I fell alsleep for 6 hrs

These decisions include: *What to write about.* In this case, Gordon used a story-starter his teacher had provided — a Hallowe'en paper doll of a scarecrow with a suggestion that the children write a story about it. Gordon used this stimulus only as a jumping-off point.

How to begin. Unlike many of us who agonize over that first sentence, most of the time Gordon began his stories by quickly writing "One day" and letting the piece flow from there. (In this case he did so at first, then changed to the appropriate variation, "One Halloween night.") This routinized beginning shows Gordon's confidence and eagerness to get into his story as quickly as possible.

What genre to use. The writer must decide whether to write a personal or non-personal piece, a narrative or exposition. Gordon often wrote fictional first-person narratives like this one.

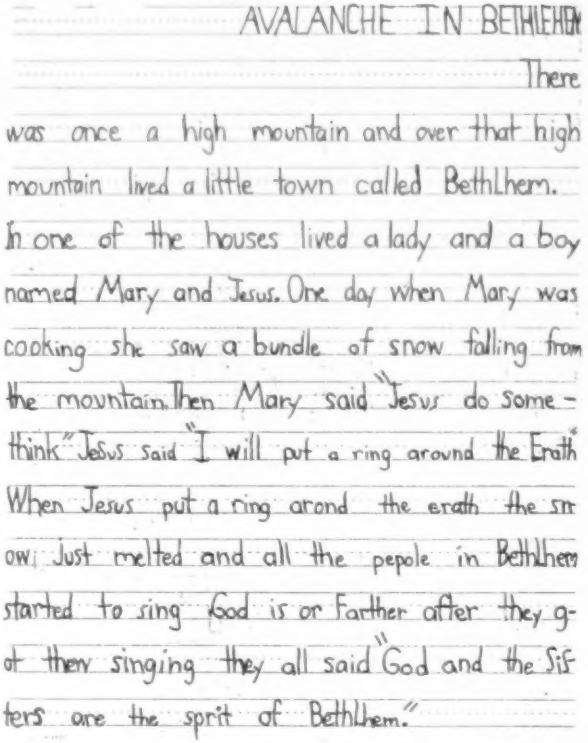
How to shape the piece. Gordon's stories always showed a strong beginning, middle and end. It was usually only if he ran out of time that his pieces lacked an ending or seemed abrupt. Gordon also favors stories with a good deal of action, and with more stress on plot than on character or setting.

What other constraints to follow. For this story, Gordon chose to write exactly to the end of the sheet of paper, a common practice for him and for other children in the study

The other important point about this meaning-creation process, in addition to its complexity, is that these decisions are not always visible but must often be inferred from the text itself. Detailed field notes which accompanied the writing of this piece show that Gordon talked a lot as he wrote it, but about peripheral or extraneous matters rather than the piece itself. For instance, he talked at one point about the physical aspects of writing, saying "I've got *thousands* of pencils," and complaining about not having a pencil sharpener. Similarly, he comments about the handwriting process, saying "I wish we could write in cursive; I like cursive." When he speaks about matters related directly to his story, they involve surface aspects, usually how to spell a word. Some of his talking is completely unrelated to writing; he discusses the Pac-Man television show and, looking for a word in the dictionary, spots a diagram of the solar system and reads the names of the planets aloud. Gordon's oral language as he writes is clearly not a direct reflection of his meaning creation process, yet that process is certainly going on: the decisions listed above were made and the story got written.

Two implications for teachers suggest themselves. First, since written meaning creation is a complex process that involves multiple decisions (which increase in number as writers mature and texts grow longer), young writers need to be supported by being helped to explore their options, expand their range, and strengthen their ownership. Secondly, teachers must realize that children don't have to be able to discuss writing in order to write. Most of Gordon's decisions are tacit ones, not requiring verbalization and probably not even taking place at the conscious level in most cases. Becoming aware of one's own process is a valuable tool but not a precondition for writing or an indication of competence.

A second kind of process which young writers are involved in is linguistic; the relevant generalization is that children are capable of using language in sophisticated ways, drawing on various types of linguistic knowledge. A second story of Gordon's, "Avalance in Bethlehem," following, serves as an example of this.



AVALANCHE IN BETHLEHEM

There was once a high mountain and over that high mountain lived a little town called Bethlhem. In one of the houses lived a lady and a boy named Mary and Jesus. One day when Mary was cooking she saw a bundle of snow falling from the mountain. Then Mary said "Jesus do some-think" Jesus said "I will put a ring around the Erath" When Jesus put a ring arond the erath the snow just melted and all the pepole in Bethlhem started to sing God is or Farther after they got ther singing they all said "God and the Sisters are the sprit of Bethlhem."

As children mature as writers, they express themselves in syntactic structures that are increasingly complex. This story is distinguished not only by the length of its sentences (which average 15 words) but by the kinds of syntactic structures found there. Two sentences can serve to illustrate this. The story's second sentence, beginning "In one of the houses," inverts the subject and verb for a somewhat literary effect. In addition, Gordon uses a parallel structure which pairs "a lady and a boy" with their referents, "Mary and Jesus." The effect of this sentence can perhaps best be appreciated by comparing it to a hypothetical alternative. If Gordon had written, "A lady named Mary and a boy named Jesus lived in one of the houses," he would have used the same number of words but in a less complex and less original structure.

The next sentence of the story, beginning "One day when Mary was cooking" is complex in another way, through its use of subordination. The sentence begins with an adverbial clause whose object is yet another clause ("snow ((that was)) falling from the mountain"). In a sense, Gordon has done his own implicit sentence combining by uniting what could have been three short sentences into one complex structure. Although not all

sentences written by Gordon or the other children are this elaborate, these two sentences indicate that even young children are capable of a surprising degree of syntactic sophistication in their writing, a sophistication that comes not just from sentence length but from the ability to manipulate a variety of structures and to develop an individual style.

Gordon is also developing linguistically as he grapples with learning how to spell and punctuate. A series of vignettes drawn from field notes accompanying these two stories illustrate how active this process is. These first ones come from the Hallowe'en story:

* After writing a hyphen at the end of the first line, Gordon asks the researcher if she knows what it is and informs her that he learned about it from watching his sister write.
* After finishing the second line of the story, Gordon wonders aloud if he should put a period after "alive," then decides not to "because I want to say something else."
* When Gordon is ready to write the word "chase," he gets a dictionary to look for it. While thumbing through it, he spots the word "Jack-o'-lantern" then decides to leave the dictionary open to that page so he can use the word later in his story. Eventually a seatmate finds "chase" in another dictionary and Gordon asks her to "spell me it."
* Twice Gordon goes back and inserts words that had been inadvertently left out. To do so, rather than using a caret, which he's not familiar with, he uses arrows, thereby "inventing" his own insertion convention.
* When asked by the researcher why he wrote "but" with an apostrophe, Gordon replies that it's similar to the one in "don't," used when something is "sort of bad news."

These further examples come from "Avalanche in Bethlehem":

* After having just found the word "marry" in the dictionary for a friend, Gordon says "Now I have to find 'Mary'" (for his own story). He starts to look in the dictionary, then says "I think it's M-A-R-Y." When asked, he says that it's possible for words to be said the same and spelled differently.
* Gordon has a rule that when one doesn't have enough room to finish a word on a line, one goes up to the edge of the page, writes a hyphen, and continues on the next line. However, when he comes to the word "something," he breaks it at the end of the first syllable even though he had room for more letters. When asked why he did this, he could not explain and indeed later hyphenates words without regard to syllable boundaries.
* When writing "Bethlehem" for the second time in this story, Gordon asks if it always needs to be capitalized and then decides it does because it's a place name. He then goes back and capitalizes "Earth" because "it's the name of a . . . a WORLD"!
* When asked how he knows where to use quotation marks, Gordon replies that they go after the word "said" and volunteers that small lines are used for quotation marks "because when they talk it's like lines come out of their mouth."
* When asked why he uses an upper-case "L" in the middle of the word "Bethlehem," Gordon says that a lower-case one couldn't be seen and would look like an "I."

These examples have been quoted at such length in order to emphasize the variety of knowledge that goes into learning to spell and punctuate. Gordon draws on instruction (capitalizing place names) and learning from outside school (the use of the hyphen); generalizes from his knowledge of individual spellings ("marry" vs. "Mary"); learns, invents, and refines rules (for hyphenation, insertion, and quotation); uses resources such as dictionaries; and provides idiosyncratic explanations for some phenomena ("but").

These examples of how Gordon handles syntax and orthography suggest that children use linguistic systems in a way that is more active, spontaneous, and multi-layered than what is presented in structured curricula such as spelling texts or sentence-combining exercises. The use of linguistic systems we see here has the further advantage of being imbedded in an active meaning-creation process, where the form of language develops as a means to a larger end. This process provides an obvious opportunity for teachers to build on what children are doing — by noticing their hypothesis-construction, reacting to what they do, and making appropriate suggestions to help them integrate and further develop their knowledge. For instance, a teacher who noticed Gordon's use of arrows for insertion could comment on it and mention that there's a punctuation mark called the caret which is used for that very same purpose, giving him the option to use it in the future if he chooses. Since children are usually eager to do things in a more adult and sophisticated style, he would be likely to pick up on that option, replacing his invention with a conventionalized form. Sometimes teachers fear that linguistic knowledge — that is, information about how to spell, punctuate, and construct sentences — is so uninteresting that if it's not imposed on children they won't learn it. However, what Gordon has

Given opportunity to write, children will grow as writers, but growth isn't obvious from a single measure or single piece of writing

shown us suggests that children are eager to explore and gain more control over language patterns when this activity is self-initiated and done in context rather than as abstract exercises.

The third generalization about young writers' development that can be drawn from this data has to do with how that development occurs and even more with how we look at it. It is that *given opportunity to write, children will grow as writers, but this growth isn't obvious from a single measure or single piece of writing.*

The study that these pieces of writing are drawn from found that over the two-year period involved all the quantifiable areas that were looked at showed change in a positive direction. Sentences became longer and more complex, spelling and punctuation became more conventional, reversals diminished. These changes occurred in classrooms where there was minimal instruction in composition, merely extensive opportunity to write. However, it is important to remember that any single measure of growth as a writer is an oversimplification, because of the complexity of what's involved in any piece of writing, including but not limited to the meaning-creation and linguistic factors seen in Gordon's stories. A child may use sophisticated syntactic structures in writing pieces whose content and style are dull and unvaried, while another child writes exciting stories using short, choppy sentences. No one measure can capture these differences and others.

Getting a sense of a child's development as a writer is best achieved by looking at his whole body of work from different angles

The complexity of the writing process also means that conclusions cannot be drawn from a single text but must be based on knowledge of the writer over time. For instance, Gordon's use of punctuation ranges from totally unconventional in some stories (as when punctuation is omitted altogether) to 100 percent conventional in others, with a good deal of variability over time. It is not that he learns how to punctuate and then forgets again; it is a matter of tradeoffs, so that on some days he is putting a lot of effort into getting the mechanics right while on others he may be exploring a new genre or writing rapidly about a topic he's very involved in, with less attention left over for spelling and punctuation. A single text is never an accurate measure of a writer's competence in all areas at that time; competence can only be inferred from looking at a range of performances across time and, hopefully, from observing and talking to the writer as well. Getting a real sense of a child's development as a writer is best achieved by looking at his or her whole body of work from many different angles, and focusing on the particular insights found there as well as on cumulative, quantifiable information.

If the lessons learned from these two stories of Gordon's and the larger study of which they are a part had to be summed up into a single implication for teaching, it would be the importance of trust — trust in children's innate drive and ability to become better users of written language, and to direct most of that process for themselves, and trust in our own abilities as professionals to use our trained instincts to tune into and support that growth. A child who can hypothesize that apostrophes indicate bad news is a child who is an active and creative thinker about language; that child's hypotheses will, given the opportunity to write and to talk about language, increase in sophistication, a process that will be even more enhanced by a teacher who can appropriately appreciate and guide.

Footnote

[1]Goodman, Yetta et al. *A Two-Year Case Study Observing the Development of Third and Fourth Grade Native American Children's Writing Processes* (NIE-G-81-0127), Tucson : Program in Language and Literacy, University of Arizona, 1984.

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CONFERENCING: Writing as a Collaborative Activity

Judith M. Newman

"What are you thinking of writing about?" I asked her.

"Well," she replied, "I've reread my journals and I suddenly realized that I no longer believe some of what I used to believe. I went back to the first article we read, the one where I disagreed with the author's argument, and reading it last night I could see that I didn't disagree any more. And I wondered about what had made me change my mind about ideas like 'writing finding its own meaning,' 'reading and writing are social activities,' and 'thoughts are created in the process of writing.'"

"Have you any idea what made you change your mind?" one of the others prompted.

"I guess both the reading and writing experiences we've been having for the last couple of weeks have had their effect. I was encouraged to try free writing, and I discovered I didn't need to have everything worked out before I started putting words on paper. I found that the writing sometimes went in unexpected directions; it was saying something new, something that was my own and not just borrowed from the research literature."

"What was your reaction when you realized that?"

"It suddenly made me think about the writing I've been doing with my students. I could see where I have been focusing on the products, having them plan what they were going to write first so that their writing would be better organized. What I haven't appreciated is the fact that we all need to be able to set aside constraints and just write to see what might come out."

"What is the one insight you would want to share with other teachers?" someone asked.

"I'm not sure yet," she answered, "I think I have to write about what I think I've learned then I'll be able to stand back and decide what I think was most important."

"How do you think you'll proceed?"

"I planned on rereading my journals, seeing what I could find in each, and then noting the *ah-ha's* on cards. I thought that would help me find out what I've learned; sort of like summing up the free writes."

"Are you able to start, then?"

"Yes," she said.

A hypothetical group conference, but not unlike many which have occurred this past year among my graduate students, all of whom are teachers. We've been exploring the many ways in which conferencing can assist our writing. We've conferenced through written responses to journals and free writings. We've conferenced as a way of taking a running start at a piece. We've shared works in progress. And we've discussed final drafts. We've discovered many ways in which to support one another through the difficult business of writing.

The most important thing we have learned is that writing is an intensely social activity. Contrary to popular belief, we have discovered writing is not something one struggles to do alone. Instead, we have found that it is more than helpful to have others assist with the massive amount of decisionmaking involved in writing anything. That's where conferencing comes in. There are many different kinds of conferences discussed in the research literature: informal conferences, teacher/student conferences, peer conferences, sharing meetings, the teacherless writing class. And while the guidelines for conducting these various sorts of conferences may appear contradictory, all of them have a role to play in helping writers extend their control over the writing process.

While guidelines for conducting conferences appear contradictory, all have a role in helping writers control the writing process

What are these different kinds of conferences like? Graves[1] offers useful suggestions for teacher/student conferences in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. Teacher/student conferences can occur at any time during the working of a piece — before anything has been put on paper, while a work is in progress, and as it draws to completion. The purpose of the teacher/student conference is to sustain writers, to help them maintain a focus on the meaning of the piece. Only secondarily is the teacher/student conference concerned with the conventions or correctness of the writing and then only as the piece becomes ready for publication.

The teacher's role in these conferences is to *listen*, particularly with an ear for what the writers seem to want to convey. In fact, Graves insists, writers must talk first. They must be given an opportunity to explain where they are in the writing process and to let their audience (in this case the teacher) know what help they are looking for. To encourage writers to talk, Graves suggests some

helpful opening questions: What ideas have you been considering? How have you come this far? Can you sum up what you're trying to do in a sentence or two? To help focus or expand a piece, he offers some general questions which could be asked of almost any piece: What's the main thing you're trying to say? It all starts . . . how? Do you think the stuff you're telling me now is important, should it go in? Tell me again just what happened? The essential characteristic of teacher/student conferences is that they are *brief*; each intervention is no more than a moment or two, only long enough to give writers a chance to request assistance or for teachers to reassure themselves that the writers are progressing.

Calkins,[2] in *Lessons From a Child*, describes three functions for these formal teacher/student conferences. They are intended to help writers develop the specific content of a piece, to help them reflect on the writing process and the specific strategies they use for writing, and for helping them learn to judge their own efforts. It is interesting that these latter two functions were an outgrowth of the research process. Questions about the writing process itself were asked by Calkins so that she could come to some understanding of what the children were experiencing. However, it wasn't long before the children started asking process questions of one another: How's it coming? What are you going to do next? What difficulty are you having? What new problems have you run into? What help would you like? Similarly, with the children's ability to make reasonable judgements about the quality of their work, Calkins was interested in the children's perception of what made a piece of writing "good." Her evaluative questions soon became a part of the children's repertoire. Someone might announce "I like it" of something just completed only to be asked by one of the others "What do you like about it?" Calkins recognized that these questions were important for helping the children assess their work more critically and such discussion enabled them to develop criteria for judging writing.

For informal peer conferences to be useful it is essential that children be able to talk to one another without fear of being censured

Peer conferences are another kind of conference described in the research literature. Calkins distinguishes two types of peer conferences: formal "sharing meetings" and informal ones which are going on all the time. The major difference between the two seems to be that the sharing meetings are group sessions set up by the teacher while informal peer conferences are student initiated one-to-one interactions. She describes how it was not unusual for students to help one another with topic selection and to sustain one another as they wrote by offering advice about spelling and punctuation, volunteering suggestions for revision, and just being an interested audience. As Calkins comments, "These interactions were interwoven throughout the evolution of a piece, sustaining and extending its life-force." What becomes apparent from Calkins' description of these informal peer conferences is the importance of creating a classroom climate in which it is legitimate for children to share freely. For these informal conferences to be useful it is essential that children actually be able to talk to one another without fear of being censured; that means permitting real chit-chat. They have to be allowed to make aside comments, or ask someone for their reaction to a bit of writing, or to talk to themselves, as well as be permitted to move around the room. Also interesting is Calkins' observation that what went on in the informal peer interactions was a reflection of the teacher/student and researcher/student conferences. In other words, the students were incorporating the sharing and writing strategies offered during the more formal adult/child exchanges into their writing repertoire and using them to help one another as writers.

Calkins also describes the "sharing meetings" in which students presented works-in-progress as well as completed drafts at whole class sessions. She outlines a structure which evolved for these sessions:

> Writers would begin by explaining where they were in the writing process, and what help they needed.
>
> Usually, but not always, the writer then would read the piece — or the pertinent section of the piece — out loud.
>
> The writer would call on listeners. Usually listeners would begin by retelling what they'd heard . . . sometimes they'd begin by responding to or appreciating the content of the piece.
>
> Questions or suggestions would then be offered, not about everything, but about the concern raised by the writer. Sometimes other things would come up as well, but not always.[3]

These "sharing" meetings are very much like the "teacherless class" described by Elbow[4] in his *Writing Without Teachers*. While Elbow doesn't refer to the sharing sessions as conferencing, that is what he is describing. He contends that an essential ingredient of becoming a writer involves learning what effect one's words have on others. He argues that it isn't until we can anticipate how readers are likely to respond to what we've written that we can make decisions about where to go with a piece and how to get there. He believes that learning to sense one's audience results from having real readers respond to our writing. Hence the writing group. In his teacherless writing

class each member of the group (anywhere from six to 10 participants) has a responsibility to be a writer and an opportunity to present his or her writing for the reactions of the others.

In his description of the writing group, Elbow deals with the responsibilities of both readers and writers. First of all readers have a responsibility to read (or listen) well. That is, they have to give both time and attention to each piece as it is presented whether they think it "good" or not. Elbow argues, "If we expect our writing to receive attention from others, we have an obligation to give their writing our time and attention." Second, readers are required to share what the words made them experience. They may summarize what they have understood of the piece, they can tell how the words made them feel or what images were evoked as they listened or read, they may use metaphors to help the writer "see" what effect the writing had. What readers can't do is tell the writer what to do to "fix" the writing up. (This latter isn't strictly true. Elbow does suggest there is no value in censoring advice. If readers have something to suggest they shouldn't waste time not saying it; however, the advice, in and of itself, is of little use except as a vehicle for leading readers back to their perceptions of the writing.) Third, Elbow argues, readers have a responsibility to be writers. Everyone in the conference group must be in a position of vulnerability. No one can be exempt from having to write and of having to share their writing.

Writers, on the other hand, have to *listen*. Listen to what the readers have to say in order to find out how they have reacted. What writers mustn't do is respond. They mustn't be drawn into arguing about the reactions, mustn't become defensive about their writing, apologize for it, or attempt to justify it. These reactions only serve to censor what the readers will be willing to share. Writers have to accept that the readers' reactions are legitimate. They have to hear them out, then decide what can be done. Writers have to write. They have to write whether they feel like it or not. And they have to share, whether they think that what they have written is good or not.

Here, then, we have two rather different views on conferencing. Graves argues that the conference should be used to help the writer talk about his or her piece. Elbow, however, is insistent that the conference is a time for the writer to listen. Graves is describing teacher-initiated, one-to-one interactions; Elbow believes that writer-initiated sharing should occur in a group context.

Both, as my graduate students and I discovered, have merit. Listening to authors is important — so is having authors listen to readers. The distinction between Graves' and Elbow's sense of what constitutes a writing conference stems from their different focuses. Graves is writing from an instructional point of view and is concerned with teachers learning to help students. In his view, teachers must learn to listen to writers before rushing in and telling. Elbow, however, is writing from a writer's perspective and wants to make sure writers have an opportunity to discover what effect their words have on readers. Consequently, much is to be gained by having writers doing the listening.

Clearly, then, there are two ways in which conferences can assist writers. One is by letting them discover what effect their writing has on readers as a means of helping them decide what to do with it. The other is by providing opportunities, both with individuals and in groups, for talking about their intentions and the difficulties they are having realizing them so that they can focus on what might not be working and consider alternatives. Both types of conferences have one goal in common: to ensure that writers retain ownership of their texts.

How did the graduate students and I apply what we learned from Graves, Calkins, Elbow and others? First, we discovered the value of conferencing even before putting pen to paper. We discovered that the opportunity to bounce around our ideas as they were just beginning to take shape in our heads helped us to get underway. As illustrated by the hypothetical conference with which I began this paper, those starting conferences were often conducted in groups where each member had an opportunity to air his or her ideas. In these sessions writers talked, first laying out their ideas then responding to queries from the others. While these initial sharing sessions were often undertaken at my invitation, on a couple of occasions students initiated such conferences themselves.

Writers have to write. And they have to share, whether they think what they have written is good or not

We also learned to conference with pieces in progress. We found it helpful to have someone else's reactions when faced with decisions — should the writing go this way or that? We found that another writer's opinion at such a juncture saved us struggle and time. It's true that on occasion we did find ourselves being led down some garden paths, nevertheless the overall support was invaluable. We also found that talking out such points was advantageous. In neither of these instances was it necessary that readers actually have the piece in their hands. In fact, we found it easier to listen to writers discuss the options they were considering or what seemed to be problematic and react to what they had to say.

We used conferences at the end of drafts. In this case we tried a number of tactics. We tried reading quickly while the writer was present — making no written comments but just receiving the piece, then responding to it. That worked well if a piece was short, but if the writing was more than a couple of pages long we found it easier to read it beforehand, jotting a few comments on a separate piece of paper. We also tried giving written synopses of what it was we thought the writer was saying. One of our most useful strategies was to present the writing accompanied by specific questions to which feedback was requested. This left the writer firmly in control of the conference. The invitation extended by the writer was explicit: you can read for these aspects of the piece but don't comment on the rest, I can't handle it yet. Then, as readers, we learned to make judgements about that contract. We learned to answer the writer's questions, but then, depending on how fragile we thought the writer actually was, we might react to other aspects of the writing as well. We learned the hard way that a good deal of trust must be established before such license could be taken.

It was through talking about ideas and problems, by seeing how others were solving their writing problems, that we learned how writing could be done

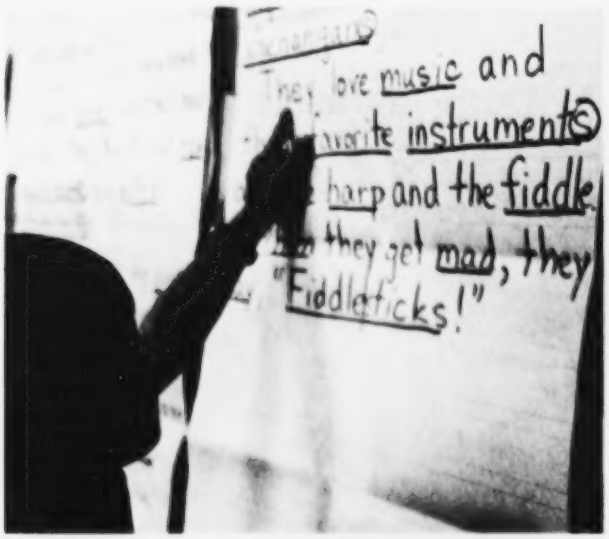
We learned to conference by having authors talk first, letting them sum up what the piece was about in a sentence or two or by having them explain briefly what they were trying to accomplish with it. We found that we could then direct our reactions to the writer's specific intentions. We were also able to react to one another's reactions. Authors learned from the dialoguing and often were able to come to a decision about what they might do next.

The group conferencing let us share our writing process strategies both explicitly and vicariously. Sometimes we talked about how we worked. Often, however, what became apparent was that many of our writing difficulties were solved by seeing how someone else solved theirs. We were only beginning to appreciate how much could be learned from seeing other people's work in progress. This aspect of sharing had been unexpected. Yet it proved to be one of the most powerful features of the group conferencing. This vicarious learning, this inadvertent collaboration, this "living off the land" as Graves calls it, was a vital component of becoming writers. That is not to suggest that soliciting individual help from other students or from the teacher wasn't useful; or that the teacher's offer of assistance or expression of interest wasn't supportive. A fundamental ingredient of learning to write, we discovered, was seeing how others handled writing problems.

It was only after authors let us know a piece was well under control that we helped them explore the more technical aspects of writing. We tended to focus on large organizational difficulties first. Subsequent conferences seemed to deal with specific wording of sentences, word choices, typographical errors might be pointed out, spelling and punctuation were occassionally discussed. It wasn't uncommon, for example, for someone to query a particular punctuation usage which would send us to a reference source to help with a decision. That was when we learned a great deal about how punctuation could be used. Finally, formatting and layout decisions were considered. On a number of occasions we would think a piece was done only to find that a few more small changes might be desirable. But there clearly came a point when the author called a halt. That point, we learned, was determined by the publishing intentions. If a piece was being readied for submission to a journal then finicky attention to detail was appropriate. If the piece was being set aside for the time being then further attention to detail was no longer useful.

How were our personal experiences with writing and conferencing useful for our students? We found, perhaps with some measure of surprise, that what we were learning about writing ourselves was immediately of value. We found that first graders could participate in sharing meetings and discuss their reactions to someone's writing. They quickly learned to ask both the teacher and other students for specific kinds of help and to decide which of the suggestions offered they might try. As Graves and Calkins have described, the teacher had an important role to play in initiating these kinds of interactions but it wasn't long before the children were in control themselves. More difficult, perhaps, were the junior high school students with whom some of the teachers worked. These students needed considerable encouragement before they were willing to risk writing and sharing what they wrote. But they, too, learned to assume control of the writing process.

Because writing requires social interaction, much of what we do in the guise of writing instruction is actually leading students *away* from writing proficiency, not *toward* it. Our most valuable insight was that writing and learning to be a writer involve collaboration. Discovering that writing is a social — not a solitary — activity was an important consequence of our experience with conferencing. It was through engagement with others, by talking about our ideas and problems, by listening to their reactions and suggestions, by experiencing the effect of our writing, by seeing how others were going about solving their writing problems, that we learned how writing could be done.



Footnotes

[1]Graves, Donald. *Writing: Teachers and Children At Work*, Exeter, New Hampshire : Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

[2]Calkins, Lucy. *Lessons From a Child*, Exeter, New Hampshire : Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 126.

[4]Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*, New York : Oxford University Press, 1973.

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LITERARY ANALYSIS
Help Children Take the Plunge With Picture Storybooks

Catherine Studier Chang

In Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*, 12-year-old Douglas Spaulding and his father have just passed the shoe store. Douglas tries to convince his father to go back and buy him a new pair of sneakers for the summer:

We all experience emotions and desires that we simply can't put into words. Children, too, frequently experience this frustration

His father didn't even turn. "Suppose you tell me why you need a new pair of sneakers. Can you do that?"

"Well. . . ."

It was because they felt the way it feels every summer when you take off your shoes for the first time and run in the grass. They felt like it feels sticking your feet out of the hot covers in the wintertime to let the cold wind from the open window blow on them suddenly and you let them stay out a long time until you pull them back in under the covers again to feel them, like packed snow. The tennis shoes felt like it always feels for the first time every year wading in the slow waters of the creek and seeing your feet below, half an inch further downstream, with refraction, than the real part of you above water.

"Dad," said Douglas, "it's hard to explain."

Somehow the people who made tennis shoes knew what boys needed and wanted. They put marshmallows and coiled springs in the soles and they wove the rest out of grasses bleached and fired in the wilderness. Somewhere deep in the soft loam of the shoes the thin hard sinews of the buck deer were hidden. The people that made the shoes must have watched a lot of winds blow the trees and a lot of rivers going down to the lakes. Whatever it was, it was in the shoes, and it was summer.

Douglas tried to get all this in words.[1]

We all experience emotions and desires that we simply can't get into words. Children, too, frequently experience this frustration. They have a smaller reservoir of experience than adults do and fewer words on which to draw when trying to express their deepest thoughts and feelings. It isn't too surprising, then, that when a teacher asks her students to respond to and analyze a story, the students have very little to say. Not that the book hasn't stirred emotions and ideas, but the students, like Douglas, lack experience in verbalizing them.

One of the major responsibilities of all teachers is to help children articulate their thoughts, feelings and ideas. In literature study, it is crucial that students openly share their initial reactions to a work of literature. Only then will they be able to use their prior knowledge and experiences to make connections with the new ideas; and only then can the teacher help them expand on their responses and lead them into an in-depth study of literary analysis which, ultimately, creates literate adults.

Traditionally, children begin a formal study of literature in the seventh, eighth, or ninth grade. They are suddenly thrust into a situation in which they are expected to analyze a piece of literature in terms of plot, setting, theme, characterization, style, mood and tone — the traditional *elements* of literature.

This is often the setting which "turns off" many children who have been avid readers. In most cases, children are touched emotionally and intellectually by the story they've just read, but the teacher's demands to articulate those responses and analyze the story in a sophisticated manner is too much for them. In short, children are not prepared throughout elementary school for this inevitable formal approach to the study of literature.

How can elementary school teachers help to prepare students? This article attempts to answer the question by presenting and supporting the idea that class discussions of selected picture storybooks in the intermediate grades

— four through six — can provide the background needed to help students make a comfortable and smooth transition into the formal study of literature. Methods are suggested for using picture storybooks in a natural, non-threatening setting to acquaint children with some of the elements of fiction traditionally studied in secondary schools. The emphasis is on student involvement and, more specifically, student talk.

Why picture storybooks? First, picture storybooks provide a relatively concrete experience with the abstract elements of literature. The use of concrete experiences provides a foundation for growth and movement into the more abstract areas of literature study. The element of setting is an example; a child could identify the setting of a story by examining a picture more easily than by reading the author's description. Later, as the concept of setting becomes clearer, it will be easier for the child to identify setting through the text.

Second, most picture storybooks contain only 32 pages and can be read aloud comfortably in a single 10 to 20 minute session. All students share the literary experience and are ready to respond to and discuss the book immediately.

Finally, because of the picture storybook's length and structural simplicity, students have relatively little difficulty identifying literary elements. Most plots, for example, contain only one major conflict and climax. Usually there is only one major character and very few minor characters. Despite this relative simplicity of structure, however, picture storybooks can be a real intellectual challenge to the intermediate reader. While the structure is simple, the concepts, themes and language may be quite sophisticated.

Few children in the intermediate grades will be upset at the prospect of reading picture storybooks, which are often erroneously labeled "baby books." If, however, older children do appear to need some reassurance, the teacher might take the advice of Beckman and Diamond who make the following suggestions for using picture storybooks in the junior high school:

> Student concerns which may or may not be voiced are something like, "what are we doin' these kid's books for?" and "what are the kids in the other classes gonna think?" Such reasonable challenges can be met by either questions or statements. The choice depends on personal style and the teacher's relationship with the class. If questions have actually been raised, teachers may find it effective to smile knowingly and ask, "How old do you think the author of this book is?" and "Can you be saying that good stories can't have pictures?" The other, perhaps better way is to forestall such questions through introductory comments that focus on the intellectual challenge of the activity that will follow. With this framework established, students can be free to find out on their own that they will enjoy these books — even at their advanced ages. Once their concerns have been recognized, students are free to stay tuned, their maturity and dignity intact.[2]

To use picture storybooks effectively with fourth, fifth, and sixth graders to introduce elements of fiction, the teacher must first establish a conducive atmosphere in the classroom. Children should, first, enjoy reading. They should be read to daily, given time in class to read for pleasure in a comfortable setting, and encouraged to read to each other and listen to stories on tape. Class and group discussions of books should be open, the teacher and class members accepting to *all* responses. It is only after this positive, open atmosphere has been established and children are comfortable in sharing their emotional responses to books that the teacher can begin to help children examine stories in terms of the literary elements used by the author.

In order to introduce picture storybooks appropriate for intermediate readers and demonstrate how these books might be used to introduce literary elements to children, the elements of plot, humor, and characterization will be discussed at length. Some of the elements of plot which are typically studied include conflict, foreshadowing, and the surprise ending.

To use picture storybooks effectively children should be read to daily, given time in class to read for pleasure and encouraged to read to each other

In most picture storybooks the reader is introduced to the character(s), setting, and conflict on the first page. *The Wreck of the Zephyr,* by Chris Van Allsburg,[3] begins with a narrator telling of his or her discovery of the wreck of a small sailboat high on a cliff above the sea. An old man comes by and suggests that the waves carried it up there during a storm. When the narrator notes that waves couldn't reach that high, the old man says, "'Well, there is another story.' He invited me to have a seat and listen to his strange tale."

Thus, the conflict is established; the reader's curiosity is piqued and ready for the rising action. By stopping the story at the end of the first page and asking the students to identify what begins the action of the story or raises a question to be answered in the story, the teacher is introducing the concept of conflict.

Another of Van Allsburg's books, *Jumanji,*[4] can be used to examine a slightly more complex plot structure, one which has a minor conflict presented on the first page of

the story (a brother and sister are left home alone and are bored) to keep the reader's interest, followed by the major conflict on the second page of the text (they find a board game under a tree with the warning: "Free game, fun for some but not for all. P.S. Read instructions carefully").

Thus, by moving gradually from the simple to the more complexly plotted picture storybooks, the teacher is preparing children to later identify conflicts in novels.

Foreshadowing, a literary device used by the author to provide subtle clues to the outcome of the story, is not an easy concept for children to grasp. Authors/illustrators of picture storybooks frequently use the pictures to provide these clues, thus making the concept more concrete for the beginner. For example, Tomie de Paola in *Helga's Dowry*,[5] introduces Helga, a resourceful troll who loses her sweetheart, Lars, to Plain Inge, an ugly troll with a very large dowry. Not to be outdone, Helga decides to use her "troll magic" to go out and earn a dowry. When she is successful, Lars tells her he wants her back; Helga tells him that she wants to be loved for who she is, not what she has. And at that point the king appears and asks for her hand in marriage.

It is only after this positive, open atmosphere has been established and children are comfortable in sharing their emotional responses to books can we help them examine stories

Unless the reader has been paying attention to the pictures, which reveal the king watching Helga's every move, this conclusion will be puzzling. The reader who has been watching the king is prepared for the happy ending. The illustrations foreshadow the conclusion.

Tomi Ungerer's *The Beast of Monsieur Racine*,[6] employs both text and illustration in a much more subtle example of foreshadowing. The "beast" which Monsieur Racine befriends and studies turns out to be two children dressed in a blanket. Throughout the story, the descriptions and illustrations of the "beast" give the reader clues; the "beast" loves foods that are special favorites of children, ice cream and candy, for example, and we're told that "From a distance it looked like a heap of moldy blankets."

After reading and discussing the story, the teacher can challenge the children to be detectives and see if the author provides any clues concerning the identity of the beast (or the outcome of the story). This is a fun, natural introduction to the concept of foreshadowing.

Plot twists, or surprise endings in picture storybooks can be examined to determine how they affect the story. In *The Wreck of the Zephyr*,[7] cited earlier, the old man's story is about a boy who learns to fly his sailboat. While flying, the wind shifts and he crashes the boat into some trees high on a cliff, breaking his leg. When the old man is finished telling the story, he picks up his cane and limps away, leaving the reader with the sudden realization that the old man himself was the boy in the story. The "surprise" ending is effective in creating in the reader a sense of empathy with the old man, now that his story is known.

Bill Peet uses the surprise twist ingeniously to create humor in *Big Bad Bruce*.[8] Bruce is "a great shaggy brute of a bear" whose favorite sport is tossing boulders down hills and terrorizing the smaller animals in the forest. But Bruce soon meets his match in Roxy, the little witch, who shrinks him down to the size of a chipmunk. Bruce learns how it feels to be tiny and frightened. Roxy saves the tiny bear from an attack by an owl and takes him in as a pet. The reader, here, believes that the bear has learned his lesson and will live "happily ever after." On the last page, however, the illustration reveals Bruce happily tossing pebbles at the tiny grasshoppers, beetles and caterpillars in Roxy's garden. "From a bug's-eye view Bruce was a great big hairy-scary horrible brute of a beast." The twist is a thoroughly delightful surprise to the unsuspecting reader.

Students are generally aware of the technique of the surprise ending, but could benefit by sharing how the endings made them feel, and whether or not the "twist" was effectively used by the author as in *The Wreck of the Zephyr* and *Big Bad Bruce*.

When students are amused by picture storybooks, they can begin to evaluate the elements of humor in literature: What makes this book funny? What does the author/illustrator do in the book which makes me laugh?

In *The Stupids Die* by Harry Allard,[9] the humor lies in the character's names (Mr. and Mrs. Stupid, and Kitty, their dog), the absurdity of their approach to living (they believe they are dead when the lights go out), and the use of word play. Figurative language is used liberally and taken literally; Mrs. Stupid hopes her dress isn't too loud, as she sports an outfit made of live, cackling chickens. The illustrations, also, must be carefully examined to derive the full effect of the absurdity of the Stupids — a picture of a bucket of water on the wall is labeled "Lake Stupid." Children laugh at the absurdity of the book and enjoy finding all of the ridiculous elements which contribute to its humor.

Dr. Seuss uses incongruous situations to create humor in his classic, *Horton Hatches The Egg*.[10] Horton the elephant sits on a bird's nest in a small tree; the branch on which he sits is so heavily burdened that it's propped up to keep it from breaking off completely.

As children explore the elements of humor in books, they need not know or use terms like absurd and incongruous. However, children enjoy learning new words in meaningful contexts, and if they appear to be searching for "the right word" in their discussions, the teacher should take advantage of their curiosity to introduce the new vocabulary.

Picture storybooks lend themselves particularly well to discussions of characterization. Children identify quickly with the main character who usually dominates the story. Due to the length of the story, character development is minimal, forcing the reader to speculate about a number of issues related to characterization; such speculation leads to a careful examination of the book as well as some lively discussions.

In *Jumanji*,[11] for example, Peter and his sister Judy take home a board game which comes with a number of warnings, one of which is: "Once a game is started, it will not be over until one player reaches the Golden City." They begin the game and Peter lands on a square marked, "Lion attacks, move back two spaces." At once a real lion appears in the room! The action builds as they continue the game with volcanoes erupting and monkeys and snakes appearing all over the house until Judy reaches the Golden City. All evidence of the game disappears and the house returns to normal.

Peter is portrayed, early in the story, as a bit of a know-it-all. He assumes the game will be boring and yawns at its warnings. It is he, then, who is shocked and most frightened when the reality of the game becomes apparent. In contrast, Judy, who appears to have a healthy respect for the potential danger of the game, is no less surprised by it but handles it more maturely than her brother.

Class discussions based on the following questions encourage children to note subtle but significant insights into characters and to think about how the author reveals these characteristics: How would you describe each of the children before they found the game? What kinds of things in the story lead you to describe them that way? How does the author let you know what the characters are like? Do you think either of the children changed after playing the game? Why or why not? If so, in what ways? Do you know enough about the characters to predict how they would act in a new situation?

Bill Peet's *Big Bad Bruce*,[12] mentioned earlier, introduces a "great, shaggy brute of a bear" who takes pleasure in terrorizing smaller animals. Even after experiencing life from the perspective of a small animal, Bruce continues to be a brute.

This is an excellent story to use to combine creative dramatics with discussion to encourage a developing awareness of the elements of characterization. Students might discuss the question of how Bruce would react in different situations using their knowledge of the character. For example, in order to determine how Bruce would act if he were to enter their fifth-grade classroom during a science experiment, students need to go back into the story and examine Bruce's reactions to situations he encounters, look for patterns of behavior and carefully study the author's choice of words in describing the bear.

After the discussion, groups of children might be given the task of deciding on a setting and situation, determining how Bruce would act in that situation and dramatizing it for the class. For example, a group of children may decide to act out a scene in which Bruce attends a formal dinner party at the White House. The use of creative dramatics provides a concrete experience to reinforce the concept of characterization as well as some extra incentive for carefully studying the characters and how the author has developed them.

Inherent in the ideas presented here for helping children become aware of the elements of literature is the basic philosophy that children learn best when they are actively involved in their learning, using language in a natural setting. Part of the problem Douglas had in expressing himself was the fact that his father wasn't open to the idea of buying him new sneakers. Teachers must be open to *all* of their students' ideas, thus freeing the students to talk and learn as a result of this talk. Only then can picture storybooks be used effectively to help children identify and evaluate the various elements of literature, thus preparing them to make a smooth, comfortable transition into the formal study of literature in the secondary school.

Footnotes

[1]Bradbury, Ray. *Dandelion Wine*, New York : Bantam/Doubleday, 1957, 19-20.

[2]Beckman, J. and J. Diamond. "Picture books in the classroom: the secret weapon for the creative teacher" in *English Journal*, February 1984, 102-104.

[3]Van Allsburg, C. *The Wreck of the Zephyr*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1983.

[4] , *Jumanji*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981.

[5]de Paola, T. *Helga's Dowry*, New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

[6]Ungerer, T. *The Beast of Monsieur Racine*, New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.

[7]Van Allsburg, *op. cit.*, see Footnote 3.

[8]Peet, B. *Big Bad Bruce*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977.

[9]Allard, Harry. *The Stupids Die*, 1981.

[10]Geisel, T. (Dr. Seuss). *Horton Hatches the Egg*, New York : Random House, 1940.

[11]Van Allsburg, *op. cit.*, see Footnote 4.

[12]Peet, *op. cit.*, see Footnote 8.

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WHAT PLACE PLEASURE IN THE READING SYSTEMS?

Shelton L. Root, Jr.

This article is based on a presentation made to the 26th Annual International Reading Association Convention.

It has been a full 30 years since I faced my first elementary school class and, during all of those years, I have become increasingly concerned — alarmed is a more appropriate word — over the negative consequences that basal reading instruction may have on reading for pleasure. Because this alarm is now one of major magnitude, I have chosen to entitle my presentation "What Place Pleasure in the Reading Systems?"

Reading systems invert the entire teacher-teaching tool relationship in that it is the system which now uses the teacher, not the teacher who uses the system

The title is, quite obviously, a rhetorical question. One to be answered late in the presentation because, if answered too early, the audience might well be lost. Nonetheless, I'll take the chance. There is no place for pleasure in the reading systems.

Now that the statement has been made, the challenge is to explain it — not to defend it — for I believe it is not appropriate to defend the obvious. Attack seems the only adequate response. Compromise, or trench warfare, has illy served reading for pleasure; it has only weakened it by attrition.

The following observations, I hope, will furnish substance to support what may seem pure heresy to some. Although there is little linear logic among these observations, I hope you will find internal logic as you arrange and rearrange them within the context of your thinking.

Reading For Pleasure is Reading For Recreation

My first observation: reading is not similar to the mindless non-engagement that most of us have experienced with television, at one time or another; reading for pleasure is reading for recreation, the result of which is re-creation — somehow more human and more humane. Reading for pleasure does not insure that such consequences will prevail. It can only provide the opportunity for them to occur. This does not infer that the material read need be ponderously fraught with significance. It must, however, be worthy of the reader's engagement.

Though there are few who would deny the teacher's role in helping children master the mechanics of reading to the end that they can vie in the economic world, some question whether it is equally important to help children learn the inherent pleasures of reading literature for its own sake. I, for one, believe the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that the teacher's responsibility is at last equally important in both realms. In the first instance, it is relatively easy to know how well we are succeeding. It is in the second instance that the teacher faces a great dilemma: encouraging children to read for pleasure, while offering them what little guidance we can, is almost an act of pure faith. There is no way on God's earth that we can *insure* that all children will become readers for pleasure. But it is an act of faith that commits us, despite our occasional doubts, to the proposition that children can find something worth their while in reading for pleasure. It is the teacher's responsibility to help find it.

"Worth *their* while" is a key phrase here. All one owns in this world worth anything is one's own while. It is the coin of life, and, no matter what we do with children, the only evaluative question of consequence is: Will it be, is it, and was it worth their while? If so, then it is worth our while to teach.

Reading For Pleasure: A National Priority?

My second observation: recreational or pleasure reading has never been high on the ordinary citizen's list of national priorities. In fact, those who read too much have always been more than a bit suspect. It is often viewed by the Earnest Achievers in Life as an idling away of time that might better be spent on something *really* important.

Before we go any farther with this matter of reading for pleasure, which everyone seems to be for, we had better find out how deeply we are committed to it because if we are deeply committed then that commitment demands a revolution in the classroom.

There are many who are committed! If for this reason alone: Reading for pleasure is a contemplative, self-

involving act; it is not passive receptivity. It is an act that encourages the reader to search for and assert his or her own individuality. It is a domain over which one rules in total suzerainty — a domain created with the help of the author, but one which is beyond the control of anyone, other than the reader. It is the one art form we print-bounded people are best equipped to help our children come to know.

Through reading, it is possible that vast numbers can become artists, and nothing is more desperately needed to cope with the coming 80s and 90s and two-thousands than a multitude of artist readers! It is our responsibility, yours and mine, to help insure that such a multitude emerges. Just as artists of whatever mediums are needed to help us see and feel and know the dilemmas and promises of our society, so are artist readers needed to understand and interpret those artists of print form to others who have not mastered the art of reading for pleasure.

Needed: Time For Reading

My third observation: if there is commitment to reading for pleasure — reading as an art form — then we are confronted with the problem of leisure, and leisure equates with time: time for pleasure (the words leisure and pleasure derive from the same Latin origins), time for speculation, time for introspection, and time for healthy self-indulgence. The nub of which is: if we are committed to reading for pleasure, then we are automatically committed to providing the leisure time in which that reading can take place.

Therein lies another aspect of the revolution. It never was safe to take for granted that if children acquired their reading skills *in school*, they would automatically apply them to reading for pleasure *out of school*. If we honestly want children to learn to read for pleasure, to acquire the habit of reading as a leisure activity, then we must provide them a protected time and an environment conducive to such an understanding.

Reading Systems: A Weighty Issue

My fourth observation pertains to reading systems. I choose the term "systems" deliberately to point out how the monster has grown from the 64-page *New England Primer*, which concluded with far harder reading matter than do our present-day eighth-grade texts, and which was *intended* only to prime, or prepare, one for reading. Reading systems have evolved through readers, through basal texts, through basal series to the current behemoth—much to the detriment of both teacher and reader.

Physically, the *Primer* never got in one's way. In its earliest version, it measured two and one-half inches by three and one-half inches and weighed less than one and one-half ounces. The system, on the other hand, presents problems of considerable dimension. The three parts of just one grade level's worth of a particular teacher's edition measure eight and one-half by 11 by three inches and weigh five pounds. Despite my convictions that we are better teachers now than we were in the old days, I don't think that this increase in bulk has contributed much to our improvement.

Intellectually, the metamorphosis has been particularly detrimental in that it has changed demands on the teacher. When all one had was a 64-page book to move the youngster from beginning to adult reading, it certainly encouraged inventive genius to keep things going. It also motivated the teacher to tell his or her students to go find something else to read. Today's system discourages teacher innovation. There is far too much already laid out to be done.

The Reading Systems Approach: Counterproductive?

My fifth observation includes some of the inherent matters that make the reading systems approach counterproductive to helping children become readers for pleasure:

The basal insures the reader a series of spasmodic, electro-shock treatments as it jerks him from poetry to prose to sign language to drama to non-fiction form

A. The very meaning of the term, as it is now used (it is the "systems approach" so commonly employed by the military and by industry) is that of a sequence of mechanisms or manipulations through which raw material, tangible or intangible, passes to become a predetermined product. Such systems are designed in order to minimize or eliminate human error, and because the best systems are those which are least fallible, they limit or eliminate human variability.
Insofar as they do, the range of interaction between teacher and learner is restricted, and the range of response between reader and text is predetermined. Action, reaction, and interaction are encouraged only to the extent that they allow the raw material, the student, to move through the system on a predetermined time continuum. Time becomes the dominant factor in the equation. To be efficient, systems encourage those teaching, learning, and response styles that are compatible with the system, and discourage or eliminate those which are not.

B. Reading systems invert the entire teacher-teaching tool relationship in that it is the system which now uses the teacher, not the teacher who uses the system. The teacher is now an extension of the tool, rather than the tool being an extension of the teacher. Claim what can be claimed for the system's offering a stimulating variety of

options, they are options within narrowly prescribed limits, nearly all of which are stultifying rather than stimulating.

It is not difficult to accept the magnitude of inversion when one realizes where the burden of blame now rests when too many children fail to learn to read, as measured by standardized tests (another False God in the Pantheon of Pedagogy).

What happens when too many children don't do well on standardized reading tests? It is quite simple. A committee is appointed to spend endless hours examining competing basal systems, many of which actually vary little one from the other. The committee, in its ultimate wisdom, selects one. And the teachers are off the hook, as long as they adhere to the teacher's editions of the newly appointed system. The stars are all in place and all is, once again, right in the Educational Heavens.

Right for a while, at least. But basal adoption is rather like the itch. It recurs about every seven years, when it again becomes obvious that too many kids aren't reading

What happens when children don't do well on standardized reading tests? Simple. A committee is appointed to spend endless hours examining competing basal systems (and) in its ultimate wisdom, selects one.

up to grade level — whatever that really means. Again a committee is formed. Again it heeds the siren's call of one system or another. And, again the whole tragic drama is reenacted. Will we never learn?

May I ask what was wrong with the solution of firing the incompetent teacher and getting a better one when children didn't learn? What we are doing now is rather like encouraging an inept surgeon to continue to operate as long as he or she changes scalpels periodically.

The truth of the matter is that a basal system is merely a microcosmic manifestation of one of the tremendous dilemmas we all face — how, in this increasingly faceless system, do we show our faces? Or had we, in self-preservation, better hide them?

C. The form and format of the basal confuses the reader who is reading for pleasure, information, or, indeed, any purpose at all other than doing better on tests. It is not a literary construct with a logical beginning, middle, and end. In that sense, it defies literary predictability. Rather, it is a series of literarily unrelated and interrupted reading episodes. It is not "book reading" as you and I have come to understand the term. Instead, the basal insures the reader a series of spasmodic, electro-shock treatments as it jerks him or her from poetry to prose to informational to sign language to drama to non-fiction form, with the reading rhythms and sets demanded by one form being inappropriate for the next. Basals are not even anthologies, because true anthologies are organized around some set of literary principles.

With all due respect to the authors and organizers of basals, I am sure there is some underlying logic behind them. But, for the life of me, I can't discover it. I've come to suspect that the basal is a sort of print hybrid, resulting from the conflicting logics and philosophies of its various builders.

D. The purposes which the basals serve are seldom the purposes which serve the reader-for-pleasure. It comes as no news to anyone who reads for pleasure that what one does before, during, and after one reads bears absolutely no resemblance to what one does before, during, and after reading a basal selection for instruction. And it should be remembered that the very purpose one has for reading defines the reading act.

The skills involved in reading for pleasure seem little understood and little emphasized by the basal authors, and are ones that those who do read for pleasure have, for the most part, learned on their own.

When the pleasure reader comes to the end of a selection, he or she may, or may not, take time right then to reflect on it, to ponder over it. If the reading has had import, the selection may work through the reader's innards for days and weeks. It is even probable that the reader will never consciously intellectualize the impact of that reading experience. There is little likelihood that he or she will start to answer questions about it, or discuss the selection's deeper meanings and implications right away. Particularly not in public! And there is no likelihood at all that the reader will even consider undertaking skill-building exercises based on what has just been read.

Despite claims to the contrary — the opening sentence of one teacher's edition of a currently popular system reads: "Stimulating young people's love of literature and developing their abilities to interpret and understand what they read are the main goals of this series" — despite such claims, even a cursory examination of any of the major systems indicates beyond reasonable doubt that the main goal of reading systems is to teach the mechanics of reading, not to stimulate the love of literature.

For example, let us examine one lesson from this series which professes "stimulating young people's love of literature" as one of its main goals. The literature section is E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* — not all of it, just the first seven pages. What follows is the text from the teacher's edition with my observations interjected:

Comprehension / Literary Skills
(The letters mean: R = review; T = test; I = introduce)

1. R-T To use synonyms to determine the meaning of selected story words.
2. R To describe a given character in a selection in terms of explicit and implicit character traits.
3. I To identify an author's use of idiomatic words or expressions in a selection.
4. R To distinguish fact from opinion in a selection.
5. R To identify elements of fact within fiction writing.
6. R To identify pronoun referents in a selection.

Decoding / Encoding Skills

R-T To identify these spellings for the phoneme (O) as in saw: a, aw, au-e, augh, o, and ough.

Language Skills

1. To identify verb phrases with direct objects.

The students don't yet know that an exercise in compound words is in their immediate future, but they will come to suspect it when, after a little chat with the teacher about friendship, they start seeing compound words written on the board and are asked to define them from the "two little words" that make them up.

Next they get a shot at *inheritance* and *salutation*. They are told to look up *inheritance* in the glossary and have explained to them by the teacher a few physical characteristics one gets from one's parents. There are also some suggestions of what the teacher "might want to do." These suggestions are printed in blue. Great, this next part is optional. The teacher might want to tell the children that *heir* and *heritage* come from the same Latin root, and about property inheritance. Well, somebody might, but I suspect few would be extremely eager to do so.

Now we are back to the black print, and the students get to pronounce *salutation* together — ah ha, choral speaking — and are told that it means to say "hello." Note, it isn't even suggested that the teacher might want to ask one of the children what the word means. Here, again, are some "might-want-to-in-blue-ink ideas," which include the opening of a letter, as in "Dear Sir," and another Latin lesson.

Now comes a chance at another list of 13 "board-words" (bored kids, too), which are "action words or verbs" — and guess what we do with them? Right. More choral speaking for all 13 of them.

Next, the children get to "listen" to seven sentences (the teacher either has writer's cramps by now or does not have an eraser). "Each sentence will contain a verb that is a synomym for one of the words on the board. Tell me which word is the synonym."

At long last, the hearty survivors are about to get a chance to come to grips with the first seven pages of *Charlotte*. All that is left is the "Reading and Reflecting" part. The teacher says, "Let's read the introduction aloud to begin the story. What have we found out so far about Wilbur? Is he a little boy? (No.)" Please note the arrogant assumption of the teacher's stupidity evidenced by giving the answers in parentheses. "What information is given in the introduction that tells that Wilbur is an animal? (He eats scraps, he was sold to Fern's uncle, he lives in a pen near other animals.) Do you know what kind of animal Wilbur is? How do you know this? (Pupils can probably surmise from the illustrations that Wilbur is a pig.) How is Wilbur feeling when the story begins? (Lonely and in search of a new friend.)" Now continue reading to discover what new friends Wilbur meets. Read to find out: Where does Charlotte live? What does Charlotte eat?

Perhaps the saddest of commentaries is that thousands of precious hours are wasted by mindlessness and thousands of children are discouraged from reading for pleasure

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All of this lead-in occupies far more time than the reading of the first seven pages of *Charlotte*, and the "after-reading" exercises take even more. Sorry to report that the excerpt gets only as far as to hint at the story's complication.

Surely the point is obvious; few of the stated objectives and the accompanying exercises do much to help the pleasure seeking reader. Even the objectives and exercises that do are embedded in so much irrelevance that the hope of gaining any pleasure from the selection is a forlorn one. Where, oh where, is the teacher's edition that even once suggests: "Tell the children to just rear back and try to enjoy the story."

Perhaps the saddest of all commentaries concerning the foregoing is that thousands and thousands of precious hours are wasted by such mindlessness and thousands and thousands of children, as well as teachers, are discouraged from reading for pleasure.

Reading Systems: Big Business

Now my sixth observation. The chances for reading for pleasure in the future appear grim, not only because the reading systems have become enshrouded by pedagogical mythology, but because reading systems are big business. "B-I-G" spelled in multi-millions of dollars. These millions of bucks aren't going to quietly fold their hands, push back from the poker table, and slink off into the night, never more to be heard from. No, indeed! The champions of reading systems are everywhere. Who, besides the publishers, are some of them? They come from every rank:

Children who figure reading surely must be a good school subject because it's so boring.

Teachers who say the basals are the *only* way to teach; or who find it the easiest (read "least responsible") way to teach; or who simply don't know any other way.

Principals who find it's an easy way to check on whether or not the teacher is "keeping up."

Supervisors who now justify their existence by holding workshops on schwa sounds.

Superintendents who are so busy writing reports and politicking that they don't have time for matters dealing with teaching-learning situations.

Tax-paying parents and other concerned members of the public who would rather be hoodwinked than face grim reality.

And, college professors, well-meaning as they are, who write the college textbooks, become senior authors of the basals, and teach their students that The One and Only True Way begins with level one and ends with however many levels his or her particular system ends with.

This has become a long bill of indictment. It could be much longer but neither my time nor my patience permits.

Let me try to answer the challenge that some may make, since it is always expected that the person who identifies maladies should have remedies at hand. Here are a few that I believe will help cut through the Gordian Knot of the Reading Systems. The most important relates to where to start and when. The answer is simply to *start everywhere and at once*! How?

1. *Give teachers who want to break with the systems all the moral, professional, and financial support that can be mustered. Give them encouragement to ignore the systems and do what makes sense, time to get their acts together, and sincere praise for their successes. Let them be professionals. Insist that they become professional. Give them the freedom to succeed or to fail. Get rid of the deadwood, the petrified trees that fall across tens of thousands of children who might have learned the pleasures of reading.*

It is amazing that this country's teachers have more years of professional training than their counterparts anywhere else in the world, and yet we increasingly limit the range of their professional expertise.

2. Make a salary differential for successful pioneers. Most of us increase our cadence when money calls the tune.

3. Give the teachers who aren't quite ready to make the move, but who want to, a short grace period — a year at most — to get ready.

4. Make sure children have the time, the physical and human environment, and the reading materials needed to insure that a vast majority will find pleasure in their reading. Create structures within the school that are conducive to this end.

5. Restructure teacher education curricula to help our would-be teachers learn that though no one ever promised them it would be easy, teaching, even though it is hard work, can be the most rewarding and pleasure-full of all professions.

6. Stop counting teacher failures! Instead, count teacher *successes*. Ours is the most guilt-ridden of all professions. All other professionals are expected to win some and lose some. Ours is the only professions in which we are expected to win them all.

7. Abolish those chambers of gloom and doom we euphemistically call the teacher's lounge. More spirits are broken there than anywhere else in the system of education.

8. Let parents and public know what we're doing. Point out the inherent wisdom of it, solicit their help, and proudly show them the consequences of our endeavors — children who read for the pleasure of it.

9. Stop using pleasure reading selections to teach the mechanics of reading, as the reading systems presently do. What an absolutely ingenious way of killing reading pleasure. I often ask God's forgiveness for complaining about Dick and Jane and their assorted brethren and sisteren, which offered only insipid content. At least when children were learning from them, they knew they weren't really reading.

10. Let's stop pretending that children can't learn to ride a bicycle until they have learned a nomenclature of its various parts, and have mastered the theory of equilibrium.

Can it be done? Or, is this just another castle in the sky? I am convinced that it can be done! And I'm optimistic enough to believe that if enough of us move together from wherever we are, the future of reading for pleasure will be brighter than ever before.

Remember, it is the teachers of this world who have always made the difference.

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